

## The White Uniform

by Soul Hunter

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Summary: A future SeeD's fight for his identity in the midst of a sorceress' attempt to compress time.

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"Lucio! Lucio! Come quick!"

I hadn't figured out what made my sister frantic. For months she had been depressed. Often panicky. The thought of not seeing our parents and her fiancé again almost drove her to the edge. I would share her desperation if I'd been less level-headed than I am.

She's more than three years older than I am. Going four tomorrow. Frankly, I used to refuse to look forward to her birthday, with the erstwhile belief that we'd be spending it in the middle of nowhere away from family, friends, and everyone and everything else we hold dear. Much as we try to come back to our home in Timber, we can't. Some kind of force field blocked the way and sealed the city from the outside world. And from what we heard from fellow refugees trapped outside the safety of their homes, nearly every major location around the world is imprisoned inside the same kind of malevolent energy.

Of course, we all know who's behind all this. That evil witch.

Humanity-hating sorceress we only knew by the name she repeatedly spouted in her continued attempts to cow my people. What was that? Oh yeah.

Ultimecia.

And I can't pretend to not know why. I have this backpack with me. I know what's inside it, of course. But often I'd find myself peeking in, with a sense of apprehension so great that I often wonder why I bother to do so in the first place. Perhaps it is true that humans have that pathological curiosity to repeatedly do things which hurt them. A friend of mine once used to insist on stalking his former girlfriend who dumped him for another guy. He'd often see her with her new lover strolling around town, hand in hand. Then he'd come to me crying like a pathetic baby who had just lost his favorite toy.

I'd ask him "You know it's going to hurt you, so why do you keep on doing it? Why can't you just give yourself a break and let her be?" He won't answer and just shrug while gulping down a bottle of Mimet.

I wonder how he's doing right now? It's been months since I last saw him, ever since those damnable force dams were erected around Timber.

Oh yeah, I'm digressing too much. Why are those energy barriers there in the first place? To try and keep people like me outside, evidently.

Oh brother, here I go again, can't keep myself from taking a quick peek inside my back pack. Anxiously and slowly, I zip the bag open and look. At what? There's nothing here but a white long sleeved shirt, pants, and a head band.

A white head band.

My mom used to be so proud of me when I first wore these garments. I remember her running out and shouting to our neighbors "Everyone, listen up! My son is a SeeD!!!"

Yeah, you heard me right. I am a SeeD. Or at least I used to be, before I ran out on my comrades because of fear.

Am I worthy of the honor? I thought I was. I used to think myself this mighty warrior, ripe before my age, but colored with much honor for my exploits of defeating one monster after another, and everything else that Ultimecia sends out against my people. I thought I had it made. And with a few others, the people of the world looked up to me to eventually rid the world of that tyrant sorceress.

And what used to be roses in the middle of the battlefield started turning stale, even ugly. During one battle, we thought we were successfully pushing the monsters back when this hideous abomination appeared before us. He was scary, man was he scary. And proud, to say the least. He introduced himself as Catoblepas, and even mocked us by asking what do us humans plan to do against the likes of him. Not much, I'm afraid. Catoblepas ran over us like so much amateurs, and made me feel desperate as I've never felt before in battle.

Fortunately, all was not lost. I tried to keep this from most of my colleagues, but the reason I'm this fearless' is because of my secret ally. He had been with me since I was a kid, and had been my friend for as long as I can remember. One call of my friend's name and out he comes, with his magnificent physique and mighty breath that all but snuffed the life out of the mutated Behemoth Thunder-monster thingie. I chuckle whenever recalling how Catoblepas cursed at me while fleeing. What a windbag!

One day, we learned of Ultimecia's plan of compressing all time to effectively wipe out existence in all its forms and incarnations. "How can she do that?" we asked ourselves. Unfortunately, we know the answer to this question, as we were briefed by the disappearance of a prototype device that allegedly can send a person's consciousness to the past. We can only speculate that the vile sorceress stole it from the secret lab in Esthar. But it's not important to know the whys or hows. We need to find a way to stop her.

Eventually, a plan was hatched to storm her floating castle. Was I wrong to assume that the plan was half-baked and foolhardy? Apparently, I wasn't. After learning that the floating castle harbored by the stone house where legends say the roots of Seed started (probably Ultimecia's own idea of her symbol for absolute conquest), we just tossed all caution out the window and attacked the place with everything we had.

How much more wrong could we possibly have been?

Ultimecia's full force rained on us hard, as all the monsters under her command, led by her seven generals, pummeled the entire Seed army relentlessly. I can still feel the horror upon witnessing how Krysta, Tri-point and the Red Giant wiped out an entire contingent of the mightiest warriors of our time.

I'd have run to their aid, but that dastardly Catoblepas singled me out. Is this guy learning-impaired or what? Doesn't he remember how I trounced him the last time? Despite the odds against us, I was still confident in my knowledge that my ally can hand this ugly a defeat just as easily as before. So I didn't waste any time.

"TIAMAT!!!"

And there he was, the mighty GF reputed for his lineage stemming from the legendary Bahamut himself. Tiamat, in all his glory, descended from the heavenly clouds with a thunderous blast. Hovering over the battleground, he glared at Catoblepas intently, as if asking the same question, "Are you learning-impaired?"

I was actually smiling, and TERRIBLY unaware of the next series of events. Just to show us how tactically erroneous we are with this battle, Ultimecia herself decided to grace the affair with a personal appearance. And to make matters worse, she had to choose ME as an example of just how outgunned we really are. With but a simple gesture, the vile sorceress enveloped Tiamat with the most malicious magic power I have ever set eyes on. I was so certain in my horror that my friend and ally was a goner for sure.

But as it turned out, that wasn't Ultimecia's intent. Though her

powers did render Tiamat helpless, it didn't kill him. Instead, my noble friend was instantly stripped of all the mark and faculties that made him the majestic Guardian Force that he was. As the Guardian heritage was painfully torn asunder, Tiamat could do nothing but wail, not so much in pain, but more in anguish of having lost the distinct legacy he inherited from the noble family of flare dragons. I actually wished for him to die at that moment, if only to spare him the immeasurable humiliation.

But Ultimecia wasn't as merciful. She spared his life, which was then already devoid of the Guardian Force power. Tiamat, my friend, ally and servitor-spirit, has been regressed to a mere monster. He may still be powerful enough to lord over the likes of Gargantua, Trauma, and the others in the host of Ultimecia's generals, but that is of little matter now. It just pains me so much to accept the fact that he doesn't even remember me anymore.

No more options.

Nothing else left but to run. We're defeated, we have to accept that. It'd be stupid beyond belief to continue fighting now that our number has been reduced to less than half. And with Tiamat gone, I can't figure out any possible way to salvage a victory for us. Better to live and fight another day.

But it's evident Ultimecia doesn't see it that way. Most of my comrades were able to step out through the stone house. But to my utter horror, the rest of us lagging behind became trapped when the same force field imprisoning Timber suddenly fell over the stone house! Suddenly, we have nowhere else to go, with the witch's forces right behind us, and thirsting for our blood!

How does it feel to stare at death in the face? How should I act knowing that I'm about to die? Honestly, I don't know. No one does. But at that moment, no one seems to care anymore, as my courageous colleagues defied the odds and headed back to face the enemy.

No one but me. All of the sudden, I felt my feet stiffen, as if someone had just cast a Break spell on them. I didn't know what to do or where to go. And my terror multiplied a thousand fold upon hearing the deathly cries of my friends and fellow warriors as they were mercilessly cut down by the enemy.

I looked around, desperately trying to find a place to hide. But no, it was too late! My adversary, Catoblepas, spotted me again! He smiled, after which a rain of devastating Thunder Summon subjected me to an infernal barrage of pain and suffering. I screamed, a noiseless scream that tore on nothing but my tortured lungs and windpipes as the electrical energy rendered my entire system frozen. I fell, all the while smelling my own smoldering flesh. Oh, how I wished I could just die!

But I did not. I don't know how much time had passed, but I regained consciousness. Though I wasn't exactly thankful because of that. My body is still feeling the ordeal of being bombarded by devastating bolts of lightning, and my stomach felt like it's ready to turn inside out.

Instinctively, I remembered the Draw point I spotted just by the beach. Hoping that it contained Cure spells, I desperately pushed

myself to a crawling ordeal, ignoring the searing pain in my being as I slowly and tortuously made my way toward the winding staircase. Sadly, I was likewise to be denied the relief, as I felt my head spin just after exiting the stone house.

Again I asked myself, how long was I out? Never mind, I'm still alive. How many lives do I have anyway? Fortunately, this second time that I regained consciousness, I felt myself somewhat strong enough to lift myself from the ground. I was just about to do so when I heard thudding footsteps approaching my spot.

"No the enemy's still here!" I thought frenziedly. I was surely in no shape to fight so I just decided to lie there and play dead, hoping that whoever it is won't bother to take a second look. Then I heard a voice, a human voice. Someone who appeared to be the leader spoke, and what he said confused me all the more.

\_"Future SeeDs. We're fighting across generations."\_

Huh? Are they fighting SeeDs too? Oh no, just what I need

\_"Ultimecia's reign. We have to end it now."\_

Whoa! ALLIES! I don't really know who they are. But as long as they're here to fight that witch, they're okay by my book! I finally decided to let them become aware of me. But when I lifted my head up, they're all gone. I stood up, steadily, then made my way down the stairs and unto the beach below. The Draw point has been emptied. Damn, they beat me to it. Nevertheless, it's quite clear that the strangers had already made their way along the gigantic chains linking the floating castle to the shore. What else was there for me to do?

I tried to fight the contagion of fear creeping all over my body when I reached the huge castle door. But I noticed that it was still tightly shut, with no evidence whatsoever of any kind of intrusion. Maybe I was wrong about the strangers. Did they chicken out? Wondering, I soon received my answer when I took notice of the three doorways along the chain-link path. They seem to lead to nowhere, though there's the unmistakable glow of bright light emanating from each one of them. It didn't take me long to decide on leaving through these mysterious portals.

"Better the unknown than staying here in this hellhole." I thought to myself before leaping into the one in the middle. To my utter surprise, I emerged in a place near a rocky shore. The surrounding terrain was composed mainly of red earth, easily suggesting that I'm around the area of what used to be known as the Centra Crater.

"Hey, there's Lucio! Lucio!" I heard someone call aloud. It was a most pleasant surprise to see my surviving comrades docking the Seed ship near where I stood. I felt my legs buckle due to the relief I felt.

And that was the last thing I remember. That is, before the next tragic drama unfolded. Waking up in a makeshift camp my comrades set up near Kalada, a small town near the fabled Centra Ruins, I was met by the disconcerting sight of that place likewise sealed inside a constricting force field. I stared at it from afar, unmindful and

even unaware of the time elapsing.

Then suddenly, a most unusual event occurred. For some unknown reason, the energy barrier enveloping the town disappeared. Excited beyond comprehension, I immediately notified my companions, after which we didn't waste any time in scurrying toward Kalada only to be met by the horror of all horrors!

A huge monsters, the biggest and most menacing I have ever seen, is wreaking havoc in the community of unsuspecting, and very much undefended town. I began to feel queasy as I recognized the nihilistic creature.

"Omega Weapon! The legends are true!" Hollered one of our lieutenants. We never thought it possible, but the mythical entity we've heard of previously only through what we thought were mindless ramblings of old folks is very real. Omega Weapon, the doomsday monster. The fearsome death-bringer spoken of in ancient lore. And it's here, walking amongst the mortals of this planet who are dreadfully unprepared against a threat of this magnitude.

The confirmation of its existence alone is enough to send the bravest among us cowering and running for cover. But the fact that its arrival coincided with the disappearance of the force field on this town is more chilling than the most frightful end-of-the-world scenario conceivable: the monster is under Ultimecia's control.

"Come on, men! We have to save that town!" was our leader's immediate order that almost blew my head off. Are you crazy?!? Do you have any idea what you're asking us to do? I was about to spew out these very same objections when I realized that everyone of the remaining SeeDs rallied behind our insane commander and staged an attack against Omega Weapon. What are they thinking?!?

What am I thinking? Why am I the only one who didn't join the assault? It doesn't have to take a genius to know that I'm petrified with fear. What can I do? I have just lost my junction, the source of my vaunted powers and courage that enabled me to conquer one threat after another. How can I possibly stand against that thing?!?

After all the posturing, all the hypocritical display of prowess that earned me the false image of a mighty protector of good I'm nothing more than an insufferable coward.

How can I live with myself? To be honest, I was at a point somewhat envious of my comrades. At least they didn't have to live with a yellow-belly like me now that they're all dead.

The one-sided battle was long over when I finally mustered enough guts to approach the town. I looked around, and wasn't even half-surprised to see everyone dead. Everyone. Men, women, children, Chocobos, dogs, cats SeeDs. All dead. And I'm the only one left alive because of my selfishness and cowardice.

I know. I deserve to die. I should have died with my comrades instead of be left to walk among the living. I desperately yearned at that moment for the grim reaper's scythe to cut a swath across my soul.

But instead of a sharp blade, I felt gloved hands land over my right shoulder.

"What happened here?" I heard, to which I raised my tear-soaked eyes to a man no a boy no I wasn't sure of anything anymore. I saw the green-hued blade held by the stranger, and secretly wished that he just smite me with it and release me from this anguish. But instead, he persisted on asking me what happened.

He was joined by five others: a gun-wielder, a blonde girl with a whip, another one with a cute little dress and the largest nunchaku I have ever seen, a gorgeous lass in light-blue, and a fellow with strange marks on his face and the most ridiculous cut-up trousers I have ever laid eyes on. They must have possessed the most inexhaustible amount of patience to have been able to fish out any information from me. But eventually, they congregated amongst themselves and discussed the situation.

"I know, we have to beat Ultimecia. That's what we're here for. But we can't just leave these people with this Omega Weapon running loose. Squall?"

"I agree with Rinoa. We have to find this monster and kill it as well. Anyone opposed?"

Those were the last words I heard them say. And that was also the last time I saw the six strangers after they boarded their strange-looking dragon ship, which took off toward the stone house.

Idiots. I've met people before with a death wish, and these guys would have to be the worst in the lot.

Then I remembered my comrades. My friends, who died in battle selflessly to try and protect those who cannot protect themselves. What do you call people like them?

Heroes. Yeah, that's it. And suddenly, I found myself wishing I had gone along with them.

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> <p>What is it now? I hurried off to my sister's side when she persisted on calling me. I was a bit annoyed, but thought I'd give her a break since it is her birthday tomorrow.<p>

But given the situation, I can't fault myself for feeling a bit incensed. This isn't exactly the most conducive place to be wandering around in. I had no idea just how eerie Ultimecia's castle is until we walked through it's heavy doors a few hours earlier. Why are we doing this? And what do we expect to find here?

Frankly, I don't know. But there's something I need to see. Something that will only bring peace in my heart once I finally behold it with my own eyes. My future brother-in-law seems to share the same ardor so he accompanied me to this trip. And since my sister doesn't plan on letting him go anywhere without her well I guess that's why we're all here in this dreaded sanctuary which used to be inhabited by the vilest soul who ever lived.

It was only two days ago when the barrier imprisoning Timber suddenly fell. At first I thought it was because Omega Weapon was about to attack again. But no I was proven wrong after hours of waiting and seeing nothing larger than a fat Chocobo making it's way through the city gates. I can still remember the mounting strain in my chest as I hurriedly sent out a random radio signal to see what's been happening around the world.

From Dollet to Deling City, Esthar to Balamb, everyone called in to report that the barriers have been brought down.

I have not the slightest idea what happened, but I'm almost certain those six strangers I encountered had something to do with this. Which, by the way, brings us now to this expedition of sorts. And about the thing I mentioned before that I needed to see, well apparently my sister beat me to it. I caught her by an old pipe organ, curiously examining what I believe to be the remains of the dreadful Omega Weapon. There's nothing left of it now except traces of silvery scales and an item that my sister's fianc  described as Three Stars. What in the world is a Three Star?

We walked up, up, along a spiral walkway leading to the top of the clock tower. Somehow, we had managed to reach the long catwalk leading to a solitary chamber, where we found what looked like an elevated throne, with the pillars supporting it shattered into a million pieces. If I know anything about Ultimecia, I'd readily conclude that this ruined piece of structure used to be the seat whence she surveyed her hellish handiwork.

And now, it's destroyed.

I could kiss that girl in light-blue if I ever get to see her again. Of course, I'd thank all six of them. But I just had to kiss that girl.

"Gimme a minute" I told my companions when I spotted a strange-looking pendulum suspended loosely under the clock tower's ceiling. For some reason, I had this idea of using it to swing to the inaccessible portal to the other side. I abruptly stopped upon reaching the other side of the doorway.

"Tiamat"

He's dead. My ally, my Guardian Force, dead. Just like the rest of them. But despite the remorse, I felt a different kind of peace inside me. I gently laid a hand on his still, cold head, and whispered a short word of goodbye.

"Rest in peace, my friend." I felt a bead of tears along the bridge of my nose, which I wiped off with a thumb and gently dabbed on his magnificent beak. Then I turned away.

"Lucio! Come quick!"

What now, I pondered annoyingly after hearing my sister hollering again. As I stood by the doorway, I saw her scampering back up together with her fianc .

"We can't go back down there." He blurted out. "It's being blocked by monsters. What do we do?"



What do we do? Good question, I thought, as I allowed my back pack to slide off my body.

"Just a sec" I quipped before ducking behind the doorway.

Though frightened, my sister's eyes squinted quizzically when she saw me emerging from the portal, clad in my white Seed uniform.

"Wha what is that all about?"

"What do you think?" I shot back. "Time to earn these threads."

**\*\*THE END\*\***

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file.